

Introduction

- Good morning, class. As Bruce and Shoshana told you, I work in the U.S. Congress representing Lowell. I'm here today for Mercury Education Week.

"Mad Hatter" syndrome

- First, raise your hand if you have ever heard the expression "mad as a hatter."
- Most of you have probably heard of the "Mad Hatter" from Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland," but the expression actually came from how hat-makers used to turn animal furs into felt for their hats.
- Lewis Carroll wrote "Alice in Wonderland" in 1865, around the same time a strange illness was affecting hat makers in Danbury, Connecticut.
- In the mid-1800s, hat-makers used a mercury compound, mercury nitrate, to remove fur from pelts. They used the mercury to soften and shape the animal furs - a process known as felting. Abraham Lincoln's famous stovepipe hats were made this way.
- The hat maker would brush mercury nitrate onto the fur to roughen the fibers and make them mat down more easily. During the process, the mercury would sometimes be absorbed through the hat-maker's skin. Plus, the hat-makers often worked in poorly ventilated workshops and would breathe in mercury vapor.
- Hat makers that were exposed to large amounts of mercury began to experience its effects on their nervous systems. They might have hand tremors or uncontrollable twitches. In the worst cases, the hat maker would have hallucinations and become mentally ill. It wasn't until 1941 that mercury was banned from hat-making in the United States.

Mercury Pollution

- Today, we still use mercury in a lot of other ways - some are safe, but others are not. One of my biggest jobs in Congress is to pass laws that protect you

and your parents from dangerous pollutants like mercury.

- That's why we have laws like the "Clean Air Act" and the "Clean Water Act" that keep our environment free of toxic chemicals. Those laws are both about 30 years old, but they are still keeping us safe today.
- One of my biggest concerns today is stopping mercury pollution coming from power plants. Some power plants spit mercury up into the atmosphere where it collects until it comes down in rain and gets in our lakes and rivers. If a fish eats food contaminated with mercury, then we need to be sure that that fish doesn't end up on your dinner table.
- Now, none of you are in danger like those hat-makers were. We know now how dangerous mercury can be if it is mishandled, and Congress is working to reduce the amount of mercury and other pollutants that is in the atmosphere. Even so, it is important that you be safety-conscious of the food you and your families eat so that you live long, happy, healthy lives.